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ABSTRACT

The concept of vision is necessary to keep school improvement on track. This paper describes the efforts of two school districts to develop their school-district visions through a collaborative vision-building process. Each district--the Dekalb School District in northeastern Texas and the Altus School District in southwestern Oklahoma--began the process with a retreat conducted by university personnel. Next, communitywide meetings were held, in which teams comprised of various stakeholders generated and shared vision statements. In both districts, the consensus-building process created a sense of ownership, collegiality, and direction among participants. One figure is included. Contains 17 references. (LMI)

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CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY/SCHOOL COLLABORATION: TWO SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND THEIR EFFORTS TO DEVELOP A SCHOOL DISTRICT VISION

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CASE STUDY OF COMMUNITY/SCHOOL COLLABORATION: TWO SCHOOL DISTRICTS AND THEIR EFFORTS TO DEVELOP A SCHOOL DISTRICT VISION

The issue of reforming public education has become imbedded in the American public's psyche. The reform impetus of the 1980s has continued in the 1990s. The eventual success of a multitude of reform efforts remains to be seen (Murphy, 1990) but it can be reasonably argued that the degree of success of any reform effort most often depends upon the quality of leadership within the educational community (Brookover, Beady, Flood, Schweitzer, & Wisenbaker, 1979; Edmonds, 1979). There is evidence that supports the existence of a positive relationship between effective leadership and school improvement (Leithwood, 1993; Leithwood & Montgomery, 1982; Lipham, 1981).

The current reform effort began purportedly with the Nation at Risk (1983). This short document provided a political parentage to many state reform efforts with their top down mandates (Murphy, 1990). The essential problem with these broadly-designed, generic mandates was their failure to recognize the variability which existed between school districts and their communities. This variability meant that "blanket" reform efforts would have little long lasting impact (Murphy, 1990). Although this has proven to be the situation throughout the country, politically mandated reform remains the predominant approach to educational reform.

This does not mean to imply that the reform effort has been for naught. If the intent was to raise test scores, this has been reasonably successful. However, if the desire was to fundamentally change the nature and structure of schools, then there

remain many questions that must be answered (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993; Whitaker & Moses, 1994). One should not assume that the reform effort has been, or will be, a failure. In fact, in many school districts, the educational system is better than ever before and there is a predominant sense of collaboration and empowerment. In these successful and effective schools, leaders are transformational in their approach and have moved past the concept that instructional leadership is the primary operational approach for school improvement (Leithwood, 1993). Leaders in these schools lead through the moral leadership envisioned by Sergiovanni (1992) and the visionary leadership discussed by Manasse (1985), Shieve and Shoenheit (1987), and Chance (1992).

In fact the concept of vision has become a powerful aspect necessary to school improvement. Vision definitions abound but a core component is how important a vision is in shaping an organization as it moves toward a better future (Blumberg & Greenfield, 1980; Chance, 1992; Manasse, 1985; Rutherford, 1985; Shieve & Shoenheit, 1987). Grady and LeSourd (1990), in a synthesis of the literature, identified five dominant qualities of visionary leaders. They determined that visionary leaders are motivated by personal values. Visionary leaders have a strong commitment to the achievement of organizational goals while being organizational innovators who develop a common sense of purpose among all constituents. Finally, they ascertained that visionary leaders consistently project a future that represents something better for the organization.

The importance of values and belief systems has been supported by other studies. Blumberg and Greenfield (1980) discussed the creation of a school culture and environment based on values. Manasse (1982) supported this view by indicating that visions are firmly established on publicly articulated values. Rutherford (1985) found that school leaders could easily and readily discuss their visions for their schools and could identify short and long term goals. Sergiovanni (1992) has emphasized the need for strong moral and ethical leadership. However, one chooses to define vision, it clearly is an important component in the school improvement process.

Given the importance of vision, Chance (1992) has developed a process by which a school district may identify a shared collaborative vision. This vision development process is predicated on a five step process. Step one is the development and clarification of a personal vision by school district leaders. These leaders include, but are not limited to, the superintendent, central office personnel, building administrators, board members, and lead teachers. Step two is the development of an overall organizational vision through the involvement of community leaders, parents, teachers, staff members, board members, administrators, students, and even community and/or educational dissenters.

The development of this organizational vision is the result of a multi-tiered effort which gradually moves from numerous small groups to one large group. Figure 1 provides an overview of the process. Members of the small groups answer a series of questions related to school district strengths, weaknesses, and district focus. They utilize a consensus building process which allows them to agree upon their answers.

Representatives then move to the next level where consensus is again reached. The process continues until consensus answers are agreed upon by all members or their representatives. Participants at the lowest level develop an overall vision and the procedure repeats itself. Subsequently, they determine how to communicate the vision (step 3); how to actualize the vision (step 4); and how to sustain the vision process (step 5). The result or outcome of this vision activity, an overall collaborative organizational vision, is important but not as important as the process which takes place. People from a variety of viewpoints are allowed to discuss the future and direction of the school district. This sharing of ideas and concerns allows for a common belief and value system to be identified. It also provides everyone an opportunity to discuss their viewpoints. The focus of the school district and the community become unified.

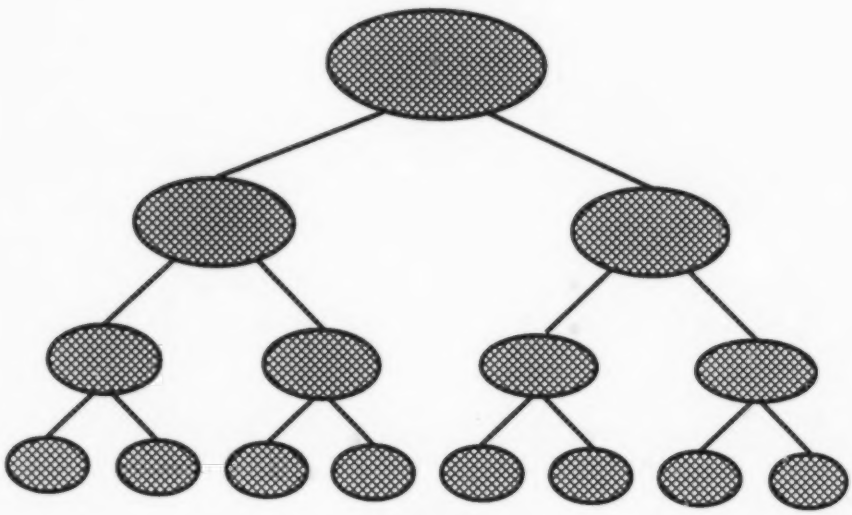

FIGURE 1

After the development of a school wide vision, individual school sites then embark upon a similar process to build a school site specific vision. These site driven visions exist under the umbrella of the overall district vision. They are just as important as the overall vision because they determine building specific focus and goals. This individualization of the vision process by school site provides an opportunity for all faculty and staff within the district to be involved in determining the direction of the school.

As important as the vision is the increased level of school/community collaboration. It is this collaboration that ensures the success of the process. The following case studies provide an overview of the collaborative vision building process and is the result of the community-school-university partnership.

The District and the Community: District One

The DeKalb, Texas, school district was established in 1831 in far northeastern Texas. The district is bounded on the north by the Red River and the Oklahoma state line. The district encompasses 255 square miles. The school has been at its present site since 1900. The district has a property wealth valued at 77 million. The current school population is 1000 students equally distributed between the elementary, the middle school, and the high school. The student population is 63% caucasian and 37% African American. The average daily attendance for students is 97%.

The community is a typical rural farming/ranching community of approximately 2000 people. The largest employer in the community is the school district with approximately 150 staff members, 96 who are certified. Over half of the teachers have a master degree. The second largest employer is the Red River Army Depot, a nearby military installation. The community also has a considerable number of retirees. Politically, the community is strongly Democratic. Economically, most citizens are middle class to lower class. The strongest religious affiliations are Southern Baptists and Methodists.

Leadership in the School

The Superintendent and the Curriculum Director are the two primary forces behind the vision building activity. Both are female with strong convictions. They are viewed by the school staff and the community as being crucial to any school improvement. It is through their leadership, that the district has received the Texas Successful Schools Award for both the elementary and middle school. The elementary school has also been selected as a Texas Partnership School and a Texas Mentor School. This recognition has led to visits to the school by the Texas Commissioner of Education and the Governor of Texas, Ann Richards.

The other administrators are the building principals and they are all male. They are enthusiastic and student oriented. Their staffs, especially at the elementary and middle level, protect and assist the principals whenever possible. The high school has

the greatest number of problems, many of which are related to staff inconsistency and intransigence. The high school principal is the only minority administrator but is supported by both white and non-white community members.

The seven member school board consists primarily of professionals and businessmen. The board members are extremely supportive of the school superintendent and her activities. The board is stable and willingly works with administrators in setting goals for the district.

The Vision Process

The process of building an overall organizational vision began with a two day retreat conducted by university personnel with central office administrators, district principals, board members, the athletic director, and Region VIII Education Service Center representatives. This two day intensive training focused on team building; leadership and management styles; shifting education paradigms; the reform movement; assessment of school and personal strengths and weaknesses; personal visions; and, strategies for communicating a vision. The intent of the retreat was to create an atmosphere of support and confidence in those present so that they were comfortable with the next stage of the process.

One month later, an initial meeting was held in the district to begin the formal process in creating an overall organizational vision. This meeting, and the next two, were conducted by the superintendent. Forty-two people from the community and

school were invited to participate in the process. These individuals were carefully selected so they represented all community interests. Six teams, consisting of seven people each, were utilized for this initial stage. Each team consisted of a board member, a professional staff member, a parent, a community member, a paraprofessional staff member, a support staff member (bus driver, maintenance, or cafeteria), and an administrator. Each group answered a series of questions individually and then through consensus developed a vision statement, motto, and symbol. Three members from each group were selected by the group to move to the next level of the vision process.

Two weeks later a second meeting was held with the representatives from the original six groups. The eighteen people in attendance were divided into three teams of six people. Each team was to reformulate and refine the results from the first meeting of forty-two. Their work included examining the strengths and weaknesses of the school district as well as determining which vision statement or combination of statements they preferred from the first session. Three people from each team were selected to attend the final organizational vision meeting.

One week later, nine individuals met to finalize and articulate the organizational vision statement, the vision motto, and symbol. At this final meeting, the superintendent moved from the role of observer to that of facilitator/leader. Her focus was to guide the nine people into developing an overall vision that was representative of all previous meetings and which represented a futuristic view and direction for the school district.

The result of this effort was the following vision statement:

> *DeKalb Independent School District, through continuous improvements and growth, will provide a caring, motivated, and supportive administration, faculty, and staff. This educational network will recognize the value of fairness and equality for all while working cooperatively with parents and community to produce confident students. With pride, character, and life skills in hand, our students will be equipped to assume their meaningful place in society.*

The motto selected for the DeKalb vision is "DeKalb Schools ... Where Tomorrow Begins Today." The symbol is a five pronged starfish with students in the middle and each of the five prongs representing fairness, character, equality, confidence, and pride.

After the development of the overall organizational vision, it was time to develop the separate site specific visions. Vision building sessions were conducted on each campus by university personnel. A format similar to that which had been utilized district wide was followed. Each site also developed a procedure to communicate their vision and identified goals which were to be achieved within the calendar year as well as within the next five years.

The school district is currently at a crucial juncture. Too often administrators and teachers lose sight of the school's vision once it is developed because of daily demands of the profession. To counteract this possibility, the superintendent consistently asks building administrators for status reports and expects the principals to do the same to their faculty. In early January, the superintendent provided a lapel pin to all teachers, support staff, and administrators. The lapel pin represented the five pronged starfish. This activity, done with the whole staff in a circle was a way

to reemphasize the importance and the district's commitment to the vision process. Interestingly, this activity took place after the district's administrators had cooked breakfast for the total staff as a means to express their appreciation for all employee collaborative efforts.

Various community and school district members were randomly interviewed regarding the vision building process. One parent stated, "I'm excited to be a part of the vision process because this can only make the school better with all the people pulling together." Another parent indicated "it is wonderful to see the school system become a progressive system." A board member in discussing the vision activity asserted "it gave me a chance to be involved in a more personal nature with the people in our community and school system." A teacher stated "the entire community knows what is going on in our system and we are all working together for change. We can set our goals high and their is no limit to what we can achieve."

The District and the Community: District Two

The Altus Schools District is located in far southwestern Oklahoma near the Texas border. When the town of Frazier, Oklahoma, located on the banks of Bitter Creek, was destroyed by flood waters in 1891, the residents moved their community to higher ground and changed its name to Altus. Shortly after selecting a new location, these pioneers established the first school which doubled as a church.

Currently, the Altus schools are housed in 50 buildings on 121 acres. The district encompasses 196 square miles and attracts students from many adjacent rural areas. Composed of six elementaries, a middle school, junior high, high school and learning center, the system is attended by 4,676 students with a 94 percent average daily attendance. The average Altus teacher has been in the classroom for over 14 years and has earned at least 20 hours of graduate-level training. Over 45 percent possess a master's degree.

The student body represents a rich diversity. Approximately one-fourth are dependents of active duty personnel of Altus Air Force Base. The majority of the students are of English, German or Irish descent, but 11.4 percent are Hispanic and 9.2 percent are African-American. Nearly three percent are either American Indian or Asian.

The Altus community is composed of three major facets including business, farming/ranching and the Altus Air Force Base. The base employs over 3,000 active duty personnel and 600 civilians. The next largest employer is the Altus Schools with 484 employees followed by Jackson County Memorial hospital with 475 employees and Bar-S Food with 400. Altus Athletic Manufacturing and the City of Altus employ over 200 people each.

Just over 74 percent of the community population has completed high school with nearly 25 percent having earned at least an associate's degree. The median community income $21,175. Fifty-three percent of the household incomes are middle class, and slightly over 40 percent are lower class. Registered voters are mostly

Democrats with Republicans making up slightly over 22 percent. The three primary religious affiliations are Southern Baptist, Church of Christ and Methodist.

Leadership in the Schools

While all are student-oriented, leadership styles vary. The superintendent represents the primary leadership force in the district with a strong desire to bring about positive change. He, with the assistance of the curriculum coordinator and other central office personnel, has provided the necessary guidance in the vision building process. The other administrators are building principals all of whom are male except one. Five of the six elementary principals have been at the current assignments for six or more years. The sixth elementary principal and middle school, junior high and high school principals have had four or less years at their current positions.

The five-member school board consists of one professional, three business persons and a minority white collar employee. While they represent distinct points of view, the board members are extremely supportive of the school district and teachers. The board is stable and willingly works with administrators and the community in setting goals for the district.

The Vision Process

The Community Vision process began with a similar format as that described for Ditrict One. A two-day retreat was held with university personnel meeting with central office administrators, principals, board members and the migrant program director to train them to facilitate the collaborative vision process. Activities utilized and objectives were the same as those described for District One with the exception that procedures and processes reflected school district needs and community expectations.

Six weeks later 180 parents, teachers, support staff members, students, community leaders and others representing the entire community and including those who had attended the retreat met to begin the formulation of the collaborative vision. With the superintendent conducting this meeting, the entire group was divided into 24 teams consisting of five to eight members. Each team included an administrator, a certified staff member, a support staff member, a parent, a student, and at least one other person representing another facet of the community such as a minority faction, Altus Air Force Base personnel, or business interests.

At that initial meeting, each of the teams listed the internal and external factors that affect the effectiveness of the district and strengths and weaknesses of the district. Subsequently, members of each team described their ideal school and drafted a vision statement. Consensus building was important during this part of the process.

Input from each of the first 24 teams was included as representatives from each moved to the next level where 12 new teams were formed. Ideas were pooled and vision statements consolidated. At the second level the teams also formulated mottos and symbols to correlate with their vision statements.

Representatives from the 12 teams moved on to form six new teams where the process was repeated and representatives moved on to form three new teams. From these three teams the final 11-member group was formed. The superintendent became a member of the final team as the members assembled with three vision statements and three mottos and symbols to combine into one on which all could agree.

The following Community Collaborative Vision emerged:

> *Altus . . . Where all students are primed to become successful and productive citizens in a safe, positive environment by accountable stakeholders who develop high academic skills and inspire personal dreams.*

When sharing the vision statement with the community, the vice commander of the 97th Air Mobility Wing of Altus Air Force Base said that while the vision looks to the future it also goes back to the beginning for the students to their personal dreams. "In Altus Schools," he said, "those dreams will be nurtured and they will grow. The students will have a reason for being, and we hope to help them learn how to make their dreams a reality."

Altus Schools - Where Dreams Grow became the motto to compliment the symbol, an apple with a large *A* in the center and a lamp of learning resting on the bar of the letter. In describing the symbol and motto to the community a parent, said

"'Where Dreams Grow' expresses that thing inside every child that wants to be something special when he or she grows up." He went on to say that the *A* expresses excellence and achievement and that the lamp signifies learning and knowledge, what schools are all about.

The Community Vision was shared with the community at a special celebration event on May 2. The superintendent opened the event by saying that the vision was designed in such a way as to challenge, to empower and to determine the destination of the school district. "With this vision," he said, "we will get somewhere and know where we are headed. I believe that our schools and our community will become a lighthouse community as everyone joins in shaping what education is to be and everyone helps in making it happen." The president of the board of education said during the celebration, "The vision process has given the district the tools to reach district goals. We can really be proud of what we have accomplished here by including the community in determining the direction we will go."

Once the vision had been shared, lapel pins were presented to the more than 200 in attendance. The superintendent closed with, "The Community Vision is just the beginning. We now must commit ourselves to seeing that we do not lose sight of that vision and to work diligently to see it actualized for every student in our schools." District Two is currently establishing goals and objectives to guide them for the future.

Conclusion

The vision building process has assisted these two school districts and their communities to focus their energies. It has created a collaborative atmosphere where everyone is excited about school improvement. That excitement exists because the school vision and goals are uniquely theirs and not someone else's. As one teacher in District One said "it is exciting to be working in a school . . . that knows where it is going." A strong vision provides a sense of direction. It allows for a school-community partnership to exist in not just words but in action. Whether these districts ever achieve their visions is problematic. But one thing is for sure and that is that the vision journey will be an exciting one beneficial to all involved in both school districts.

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